

# Banned Books: Questioning our Right to Read

*Katie Zimmerman*

## Introduction/Rationale

**“Recognizing the difference between an individual restricting his or her own choices and action by the governmental or public body is at the root of any discussion of censorship. The first is an exercise of freedom, while the second is its reverse.”<sup>1</sup>**

This unit is intended for students in grades 2 through 5. They will use what they learn about censorship and write some opinion pieces during the ELA block or during a Social Studies period about the concept of censorship and books that have been banned. Students would benefit from this unit because they need to gain a better understanding of what it means to censor something, be it a book or an idea. Having this understanding of this concept will help them become better informed individuals. Everyone needs to be well-informed so that they can make educated decisions.

This unit will look at why people want to ban books, who’s doing the complaining about certain books, what type of categories tend to be on the banned book list, what gets done when a book is challenged, and why do people complain about certain books at the school level. The class will also look at the process it takes to ban a book at school and how the First Amendment is applied with the school setting.

As I have read the different books and articles from our seminar I feel a unit on banned books will be good for my students. Many of them probably do not realize books have been banned in certain libraries in certain states. For instance, last year as a read-aloud I read Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone to my class. My students loved it and wanted me to continue reading the series during our read aloud time. However, according to *Banned Books* by Robert P. Doyle, this book was banned in many different states because the book is “considered objectionable because of the intense story line, the violence, the wizardry, and the sucking of animal blood.”<sup>2</sup> Should this book be banned when it instills a love of reading in a child that may not have had it before they heard the story? Children need to know that censorship is alive and well in the United States. They

need to be able to read and discuss certain aspects of books so that their background knowledge is broadened. I hope to do this within this unit.

In today's society many things seem to be censored by one group or another. Censorship is not new, it seems everyone at one time or another has wanted to censor something. Even when someone opposes something it also intrigues us. People become curious as to why something is being banned and, thus more exposure to the banned item generates an interest in that banned item. Many things have been banned at some time in history. However, books are probably the most significant form of expression that is subjected to censoring. Everyone has the right to both look for and receive information from all points of view without any interference from others. This is our right and our freedom. Everyone needs to be well-informed.

Delaware has adopted the Common Core State Standards for ELA and Math and the Next Generation Science Standards, however there has not been an update to our Social Studies Standards at this time. Therefore, I will be addressing both Social Studies Delaware State Standards for Second Grade and CCSS ELA and Writing standards within my unit. This unit will address the following:

- **Delaware's Civics Standard Two K-3:** Students will understand that respect for others, their opinions and their property is a foundation of civil society in the United States.
  - ❖ An enduring understanding of this standard that students need to understand is "The principles and ideals underlying American democracy are designed to promote the freedom of the American people."
- **Reading Informational Text CCSS: 2.8-**Describe how reasons support specific points the author makes in a text.
- **Writing CCSS: 2.1-**Write opinion pieces in which they introduce the topic or book they are writing about, state an opinion, supply reasons that support the opinion, use linking words (e.g., because, and, also) to connect the opinion and reasons, and provide a concluding statement or section.
- **Writing CCSS: 2.5-**With guidance and support from adults and peers, focus on a topic and strengthen writing as needed by revising and editing

Writing about their opinions could prove difficult for my second grade students. Many of them have opinions on many topics but being able to write them down with reasons could prove difficult if this unit is done in the beginning of the school year. Most students have been exposed to writing a one or two sentence opinion in first grade however by second grade they are expected to write three to five sentence paragraphs by the end of the school year. Hopefully, with practice writing shorter opinion pieces about books that we read together, or on their own, will help them with this skill.

## **Demographics**

My school, Wilmington Manor Elementary School, is located in New Castle, Delaware. It is part of the Colonial School District. This is a small school, with about 331 students in grades K-5. We are considered a Title 1 school, which means that over 50% of our students live in low income families. There is a very high population of English Language Learners (ELL). 37.7% of students at Wilmington Manor are classified as ELL. Many of our students are their family's only English speaker. Many parents cannot read my notes or information/instructions that are sent home in English, and they are unable to help their students with work that is sent home in English.

Within my own classroom 10% of students are labeled Special Education. They are serviced within my classroom by me. Ninety percent are Regular Education students that are also in my classroom, although many of these "regular" education students are reading below grade level. With such a diverse group of students my unit will include activities for all different levels of learners. Those students that work above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level all have equal opportunities to work toward proficiency in this unit.

## **Learning Objectives**

- Students will read and discuss different pieces of literature that have been challenged or banned somewhere within the United States.
- Students will learn about censorship, what it is and how it affects them.
- Students will write opinions about different books that they have read together or individually.
- Students will discuss the Constitution and First Amendment and how it relates to their life.

## **Essential Questions**

- Why are certain books banned in different states?
- What is censorship and how does it affect me?
- What is an opinion about one of the books read?
- What is the Constitution and First Amendment?

## **Overview of Topic**

### *Censorship*

Censorship is not new. At one time or another everyone has wanted to censor something. Adults censor to protect the children and children even do it to protect the adults in their life.

Censor is defined in Webster's Online Dictionary as "to examine books, movies, letters, etc., in order to remove things that are considered to be offensive, immoral, harmful to society, etc. Or to examine in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable."<sup>3</sup> Censorship is the withholding of ideas and information that certain people (which can be an individual, a group/s, or the government) find offensive or unacceptable. Any discussion of censorship recognizes the difference between a person restricting his or her own choice and the government taking action. Censors pressure public people and institutions to remove from the public the ability to read information, for example, a book that they feel is unsuitable for everyone. These censors want to judge materials for everyone else. A censor believes that they can improve society, protect children, and restore what the censor feels is lost moral values.<sup>4</sup> Even as something is opposed people are intrigued and curious about it, which then causes interest in the topic and causes discussions.

As stated by the Supreme Court Justice William Brennan, in *Texas v. Johnson*, "If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the Government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable."<sup>5</sup> Everyone will sacrifice our own right to choose if the government or another public group makes that choice for us. All people need to be aware of the censors' intent and be sure to understand our rights.

## *The First Amendment*

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."<sup>6</sup>

This law has gone through many changes since its inception. At first its protection was primarily used for political expression. However, each subsequent decision has lent weight and voice to "what has become a solid foundation for the right of writers and speakers to express themselves freely without fear of repercussion."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, even though this law is in place a national survey on free expression done in 1991 "noted that the respondents displayed an inability to distinguish between what the law protects and what they dislike personally."<sup>8</sup> Americans are prone to suppress expression and is most visible in public libraries and schools. Many parents and local groups challenge materials due to religion, inappropriate or objectionable language, and anything of a sexual nature.

### **Censorship, Book-Banning, and Schools**

The first amendment applies a little differently in schools compared to other public institutions.<sup>9</sup> A key goal for schools is to create an informed well-rounded person who is capable of making decisions based on what they believe in. Schools are a marketplace of ideas which are exchanged and talked about through materials used and the interactions of teachers and their students.<sup>10</sup> The First Amendment protects an educator's ability to decide which standards to use and how to apply them in order to create learning environments that help our students learn the knowledge and skills needed to become those productive, self-sufficient contributing members of society when they become old enough. With this in mind people need to remember that a school cannot be compared to a public park. While students and teachers do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate, speech is not as free inside as it is on the outside."<sup>11</sup> The First Amendment is a framework that defines certain rights and responsibilities.

Educators get to exercise their professional judgement and fulfill their educational goals as long as our decisions are based on sound educational and pedagogical principles. They must also enhance their students' ability to learn. However, many of our decisions can be challenged because of how people feel toward an unpopular or controversial idea

or the desire to conform to certain viewpoints. Unfortunately, there are too many times that censorship based on individual sensitivities and concerns restrict the knowledge available to students.<sup>12</sup> If we only followed these desires as criteria for censoring materials our school curriculum would only contain the least controversial. This would probably be the least relevant materials. This would mean students' concerns would hardly be addressed, their curiosity wouldn't be satisfied, and it would not prepare them for life as an adult.

Also, by limiting teacher resources, censorship hampers their ability to explore all possible ways to motivate and reach ALL students. "When we strip teachers of their professional judgement, we forfeit the educational vitality we prize. When we quell controversy for the sake of congeniality, we deprive democracy of its mentors."<sup>13</sup> Having the right to free speech is applied in ways that will not interfere with the school or district's mission. The law of book banning has given almost unlimited authority to school officials to control curricular expression.<sup>14</sup> The courts have usually held that a student's right to receive information is subject to a school board's authority to determine the curriculum and library collections.<sup>15</sup>

Books have been challenged and removed from public and school libraries for many years. It is important that everyone has the freedom to not only choose what they read, but be able to select from all of the possibilities that are out there. The American people need to be alert to assure that access to all materials is protected. Censors continue to try and threaten our freedom to read, even if they have good intentions, they are still trying to limit the freedom of others to choose what they read, see, or hear. Controversial books have been banned, burned, and challenged. The American Library Association says that written challenges are "formal, written complaints filed with a library or school requesting that materials be removed because of content or appropriateness."<sup>16</sup>

Banning a book means not allowing others to read it or even have it. Some of America's and the World's favorite authors have been challenged by different groups. Judy Blume, JK Rowling, Maya Angelou, Barbara Park, Eric Carle, and Roald Dahl are just a few of the authors who have been banned or challenged. Every year during a week in September an event takes place in the United States. Bookstores and libraries celebrate our freedom to read with a Banned Books Week sponsored by the American Booksellers Association and the American Library Association. By doing this they are raising public awareness and bringing attention to the dangers of restricting people's choices in what they read.<sup>17</sup>

The Freedom to Read Foundation was established to promote and defend the rights established by the First Amendment. They want to foster libraries as institutions where every individual's First Amendment freedoms are satisfied, and to support the right of libraries to include in their collections and make available any work which they can legally obtain.<sup>18</sup> The National Coalition Against Censorship states "there are practical and educational as well as legal reasons to adhere as closely as possible to the ideals of the First Amendment."<sup>19</sup> Some school districts have been stunned to find out that after allowing the removal of a single book events quickly spiraled out of their control as demands for review of their entire classroom reading programs followed. What has been found far too many times is that giving in to a minor adjustment can turn into a huge battle concerning the entire curriculum.

It is important to raise well-informed young people. "When young people, under thoughtful guidance of adults, are given the chance to choose for themselves what to read, something good happens. They become better and better at making their own wise decisions and choices."<sup>20</sup> The US is such a diverse nation. From this we have a huge variety of books available for anyone who might be interested in them. The First Amendment assures us of this. It is up to all of us to protect that right!

### **Censorship by the Numbers**

Censorship, unfortunately, is something that takes place every day. On the website of the American Library Association tracks and reports incidents of censorship. Their data shows that censorship is a problem of significant magnitude, and they estimate that for each incident reported, there are four or five that go unreported.<sup>21</sup> Between the years of 1990 and 1999 there were 5,246 challenges reported and during the years of 2000-2009 there were 7,971 challenges reported.<sup>22</sup> During the 1995-1996 year alone, there were 475 challenges to educational materials and these came from all regions of the country and most states and during the 2000-2009 there were 1,811 challenges in schools.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Materials commonly attacked***

As stated by the NCAC almost 70% of challenges are directed at material in school classrooms or libraries with the rest being aimed at public libraries.<sup>24</sup> Parents are the ones that usually call attention to a book. The challenge process begins when someone objects to materials being used in a classroom, school, or library.<sup>25</sup> The ALA states that majority of the challenges to materials was because the content was "sexually explicit". The other top three objections were 1) offensive language, 2) unsuited to an age group, and 3) violence.

### ***Complaint Procedures***

In order for materials to be challenged there is a set procedure that needs to be followed. One of the first things the person or persons who have a complaint must do is to put it in writing. Any anonymous phone calls, rumors, or voiced concerns will not be honored or heard; action will only occur when the complaint form has been returned.<sup>26</sup> Complainants will need to identify themselves both by name/address and their interest in the material; they must have read/seen the entire work that has been objected to; complaints have to have specific reasons for the objection; they will need to request a specific remedy (i.e. an alternative assignment, etc); and finally complaints standing alone will not be considered grounds for disciplining teachers or librarians.<sup>27</sup> A committee will then be created to review the materials and go through a review process.

### ***Strategies***

To teach my unit I will rely on several teaching methods including direct instruction, collaborative pairs, collaborative groups and individual activities.

Whole group, direct instruction will occur daily at the beginning of my lessons. There will be activating strategies, an introduction to the concept we are working on that day and the concept of I Do, We Do, and You Do so that my activities are scaffolded throughout.

Collaborative pairs are a great way to ensure that all students become engaged in an activity. Pairs usually help the students focus on what they have to do without too many people monopolizing the conversation. Students have an opportunity to discuss what they know and explain their opinions to others. Collaborative groups will stay to no longer than 4 students so that they can still have a rich discussion but again not having one or two people monopolizing the whole class.



## Unit

### *Activating Activity*

#### Picture Splash:

Put appendix A on the board (Elmo or smartboard) that has pictures of books that have been challenged or censored. Ask students what they think these books have in common. Write their ideas/suggestions around the outside of the pictures or on another chart. Ask: "How many of these titles have you read?" Then explain that each of these titles have been either challenged or censored for one reason or another. Explain that to challenge a book means to ask that a book be censored or have restricted access due to a particular reason. To censor a book means someone has been able to get that book taken off of the library shelf so that no one can read it because that person feels that it is not suitable for anyone. Final questions to ask in a "Think, Pair, and Share" is "What reasons do you think these books were objected to?"

#### *Activity 1: Creating the Mood*

Hand out in an obvious, but kind of secretive way several well-known banned books (Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, any Goosebumps book, Where the Sidewalk Ends, The Lorax, and Sylvester and the Magic Pebble to name a few) in brown paper bags with lots of whispering and "shhh-ing" to create atmosphere. Then walk over to your bookshelves and begin to pick books out and throw them into a wastebasket that you have moved to the middle of the floor. As you throw them in make remarks like "bad language", "nasty topic", "dangerous ideas", etc. Then turn to the class and ask them if students should be allowed to read these books that some people believe are inappropriate. Ask: What does this mean? What is the source of our freedom in the United States that gives us our rights? Then on the board put a copy of the First Amendment (Appendix B). Discuss what things are included on it. Explain that books (and other materials) are often challenged usually with the best intentions:

- to protect people (especially children) from unsavory, unpopular, scary, or mature ideas.
- language used in the story/book
- Violence
- Demeaning family values
- Drugs/alcohol

➤ Anti-patriotism

Ask: “Do you think anyone should have the right to limit what you see, read, or hear?” “Have you ever read/watched/ listened to something that made you feel uncomfortable? Scared? Something you knew you shouldn’t be doing?” “How about your parents...do you talk to them about what you are reading, or watch a TV show or movie with them?” Do they limit what you read, watch, hear? Discuss each of these questions with your class, making notes on a chart that you could revisit later.

**Activity 2:** Quick Write

Show and read the First Amendment (Appendix B) and remind students that it protects our freedom of speech and freedom of press. What does this mean? It means that US citizens receive some protection from the First Amendment such as (A) when people are able to choose among differing and competing ideas, they make better choices and (B) being exposed to competing ideas provides us with variety which then enriches our society. Watch the following three videos (all total are about 15 minutes):

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIVrqO5Ot5A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIVrqO5Ot5A) : The First Amendment Song-Jessica Frech

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zeeq0qaEaLw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zeeq0qaEaLw) :Freedom of Speech: Crash Course Government and Politics #25

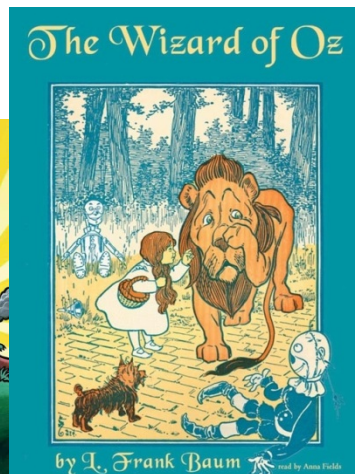
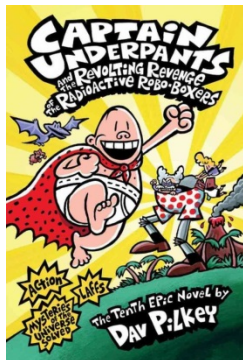
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vtpd0EbaFoQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vtpd0EbaFoQ) : Freedom of the Press: Crash Course Government and Politics #26

After watching the videos discuss what was said, then have students do a Quick Write (Appendix C) which asks: “Which benefits of the First Amendment does reading most clearly provide us and why do you believe it is so?”

**Activity 3:** In My Opinion Paper

Pick two or three books that are at your students’ level and read all of them to the class or have them set up at a center and have them read through them when they get a chance. After reading the books students will complete the graphic organizer (Appendix D) to get their ideas down about whether the one book that was their favorite out of the two or three should have been banned. They should give reasons why or why not. After completing the organizer they will then write a rough draft, edit and then write a good copy on the good copy paper (Appendix E)

Appendix A



TEN FAVORITE BANNED CHILDREN'S BOOKS  
FROM [WWW.AMELIESBOOKSHELF.COM](http://WWW.AMELIESBOOKSHELF.COM)

***Appendix B***

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*



*Appendix D*

Student Name

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Opinion Writing Organizer

My Opinion:

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Reason 1:

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Reason 2:

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Reason 3:

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My Opinion Restated (Closing):

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Doyle, Robert P., *Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read*, 2010, 15
- <sup>2</sup> Doyle, Robert P., *Banned Books: 2007 Resource Guide*, 2007, 138
- <sup>3</sup> Dictionary online, Merriam-Website: [www.i.word.com](http://www.i.word.com), accessed December 14, 2015)
- <sup>4</sup> Doyle, Robert P., *Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read*, 2010, 15
- <sup>5</sup> Doyle, Robert P., *Banned Books: Challenging Our Freedom to Read*, 2010, 17
- <sup>6</sup> First Amendment Center: [www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about-the-first-amendment](http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/about-the-first-amendment) , accessed December 14, 2015
- <sup>7</sup> National Coalition Against Censorship, [www.NCAC.org](http://www.NCAC.org) , accessed October 18, 2015
- <sup>8</sup> Foerstel, Herbert N., *Banned in the U.S.A.*, 2002, 13
- <sup>9</sup> National Coalition Against Censorship, [www.NCAC.org](http://www.NCAC.org) , accessed October 18, 2015
- <sup>10</sup> National Coalition Against Censorship, [www.NCAC.org](http://www.NCAC.org) , accessed October 18, 2015
- <sup>11</sup> Tinker vs Des Moines, 1969
- <sup>12</sup> Foerstel, Herbert N., *Banned in the U.S.A.*, 2002, 77-78
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**Curriculum Unit Title**

Banned Books: Questioning Our Right to Read

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**KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.**

Students will gain a better understanding of what it means to censor something and become a better informed individual that can make educated decisions.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT**

Why are certain books banned in different states?  
What is censorship and how does it affect me?  
What is an opinion about one of the books that we read?  
What is the Constitution and the First Amendment?

**CONCEPT A**

Censorship

**CONCEPT B**

First Amendment

**CONCEPT C**

Opinion Writing

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A**

1. What is censorship?
2. What does it mean to ban something?
3. What are reasons books would be banned?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B**

1. What is the First Amendment?
2. What is Freedom of Speech?
3. What is Freedom of the Press?
4. Which benefits of the First Amendment does reading most clearly provide us and why do you believe it is so?

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C**

1. Which book is your favorite and do you think it should be banned?

**VOCABULARY A**

Censorship, Ban, Reasons, Affect

**VOCABULARY A**

Amendment, Freedom, Speech, Press, Benefits

**VOCABULARY A**

Opinion, Reasons, Organizer , Rough Draft, Final Draft

**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES**

Smart board, chart paper, lined paper.

All needed papers for activities can be found at the end of the unit.

Websites such as [www.corestandards.org](http://www.corestandards.org) and [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) are helpful for planning and implementing the lessons.